Welcome back. Today we are doing the second of two lectures on the limits of reason and the philosophy of common sense. This will bring to a close our discussion of classic enlightenment epistemology. Next time we’ll begin two lectures that will bring us into the 20th century, back to our old friend Gilbert Ryle, to close out this part of the course.

I want to pick up where we left off and talk today in a bit more detail about the essential hallmarks of the philosophy of common sense, also known as Scottish naturalism, also known as common sense philosophy. It’s gone under a lot of names. But there are several hallmarks to this position or to this cluster of positions, because really it’s not just one school of thought but it’s several schools of thought that have existed since the Enlightenment with a certain common thread and a common attitude towards inquiry.

In discussing this, we’re going to look at some work by David Hume and by Thomas Reid who we’ve already discussed and who we’ve already examined a little bit, but today we’re going to go into more detail and talk about their views a bit more comprehensively.

So let’s just begin with the hallmarks of Scottish naturalism. I would say that probably this was the main sense in which the Scottish naturalist outlook differs or diverges from the standard classic Enlightenment view is in its estimation of human nature, how it understands human beings as distinct from the rest of the creatures on the earth. As we’ve said before, philosophy traditionally has had a rationalistic mindset. That is, it has human beings as distinct for their capacity to think and to
reason, and that this way of thinking about human beings has certainly led philosophy in certain directions and not let philosophy in other directions.

And its act is a very fundamental notion of what a human being is and what is distinctive about a human being that the philosophers of common sense really diverge from the mainline tradition in philosophy. The Scottish naturalists are convinced that human beings are not just thinkers or knowers — that’s not a word, but we’ve been talking about knowledge in this part of the course. Humans are not simply creatures that think or acquire knowledge, but human beings are doers. We are actors. We’re actors in the way that animals are not. That is, an animal, on this way of thinking, certainly behaves. An animal is a behaver — also not a word — but an animal in that sense is largely a mechanism, a kind of organic machine who behaves according to sort of the principles of its nature. A human being is an actor in a more substantial sense in that we not only behave but we act in a deliberate and a sort of conscious fashion that implicates our identities in a way much more than it does in an animal. An animal’s behavior doesn’t, in a sense, speak to its identity in the way that a human being’s actions speak to his or her behavior.

Now, this idea that human beings are not simply thinkers or knowers, acquirers of knowledge, but doers, actors, is crucial to understanding the Scottish naturalist position. Hume says that in a normal, sound, healthy human being, thought and activity must exist in a balance with one another. That is, thought can never become so excessive that it infringes upon activity. Likewise, activity should never become so encompassing that it precludes thought. Hume says this very clearly and one of the
wonderful things about reading Hume is his absolute clarity and his straightforwardness in articulating his positions. There’s nothing coy or obfuscating about Hume.

Hume says, on the bottom of page 8 of your readings, he says, quote, “A man is a reasonable being.” Meaning a thinker. “And as such, receives from science his proper food and nourishment.” Then he goes on to say, “But man is a sociable no less than a reasonable being. Man is also an active being. And from that disposition as well as from the various necessities of human life, he must submit to business and occupation. It seems, then, that nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to the human race and secretly admonished them to allow none of these biases to draw too much so as to incapacitate them for some other occupations and entertainments. Indulge your passion for sciences. She — nature. But let your science be human and such as may have a direct reference to action and society.”

So Hume is very clearly saying that nature has designed us both with the capacity to think and the capacity to act, and that the healthy, normal human being does both and does both in balance and in harmony with one another, and never does one or the other to the exclusion of the other and thus to extremes.

Indeed, Hume argues that the person who is an excessive cognizer, the person who excessively emphasizes the rational rather than the active side of his being, Hume says such a person is actually mentally ill. He doesn’t use the word mental illness and, of course, in the 18th century they didn’t have the kind of conception of mental illness that we have today. But what Hume says about the person of excessive rationality or the person who is excessive in thinking rather than doing, the words that Hume uses to
describe such a person are precisely the kinds of words that we use today to describe someone who is mentally ill.

He says, quote — and he’s still talking here about what nature prescribes for human beings — he says, quote, “Abstruse thought and profound researches I prohibit and will severely punish” — this is nature talking — “by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you, and by the cold reception which your pretended discovery shall meet when communicated.”

All right. So he’s saying the person who does nothing but think, the person who does nothing but reason, the person who spends their entire lives in a kind of a desperate pursuit for truth and for justification, as we’ve been talking about these concepts, is inevitably going to be depressed. Because, as we have seen, the train of rational justifications at some point must come to an end. There is no way ultimately to justify our most foundational, most basic beliefs, those beliefs that underlie everything else we believe: the belief in the external world, the belief that there are other minds other than my own, sort of fundamental beliefs that underlie our entire worldview, our entire way of thinking about things.

There ultimately is no way to rationally justify these beliefs. And so the person who is excessively rational in their mindset is going to ultimately find himself in a state of depression, the depression that comes when one is frustrated in one’s pursuits, and also is going to find himself suffering a kind of paralysis. Because, of course, if you’re the sort of person who requires a justification for everything before you believe it or do it, when such a justification is not forthcoming, one will find oneself in a kind of
incapacitated, paralyzed state of being unable to act. And he also here mentions the cold reception which you shall be met with.

I have found and I’m sure you will find that most people don’t have very much patience for a very long philosophical disputation and certainly people don’t have patience for skepticism when it goes beyond merely the kind of healthy doubts that we should have in order not to be too excessively credulous but become the kind of doubts that simply are ends in themselves. People, I’ve found, tend to have very little patience for this and this is why he says the excessive rationalizer, the excessive thinker will meet with, as he says, a cold reception.

Notice that being a doer — if we’re gonna say that a human being is both a thinker and a doer, an acquirer of knowledge as well as an actor in a social context, that being a doer means that thinking at some point has to come to an end. At some point — if you’re going to do something, that means you must have made a decision. In order to have made a decision means you must’ve already reached a conclusion. And reaching a conclusion means that one’s thinking is at an end.

Now, we’ve seen that our ability to find or identify reasons for the things we believe at some point reaches a point at which it sort of can be pursued but without bearing any fruit, right? If you remember our discussion of Descartes, there reaches a point at the point at which we’re trying to justify our belief in the existence of the external world, trying to justify our belief in the existence of persons or minds other than our own, and we can add to this other sort of ground level beliefs that seem to admit of no justification, the person who insists upon justifying prior to believing, proving prior to
believing and thus prior to acting, is going to find him or herself incapable of acting. At some point, in order to act, you have to terminate that process of searching for proof, searching for justification, and simply choose one belief or another, one position or another. One is gonna have to make a decision.

So being a doer means that thinking at some point has to come to an end. That one finally must take a position, even if it has not been proven to the nth degree. And so the common sense philosophy — the Scottish naturalist emphasis on a balanced view of human nature, this picture of human beings as both thinkers and doers, means that the common sense philosopher values prudence as much as truth. All right. The common sense philosopher is as concerned with sound judgment and behavior in the sense of soundness that means sort of — judgment and behavior that’s sort of in the long-term has good results. The common sense philosopher is going to be as concerned with prudence in that sense as he or she is going to be concerned with always being in possession of the truth.

And this is really the main reason why the Scottish naturalist rejects Pyrrhonism. Pyrrhonism ultimately — it’s funny. Pyrrhonism is one hand the most — in many ways the most rational philosophy, right? If one truly lives according to reason and only according to reason, then the fact that our beliefs cannot be justified entails that we ought to suspend all judgment until such a justification is forthcoming. So in a sense the Pyrrhonist is the ultimate rationalist and that the Pyrrhonist is really very, very true to this devotion to reason, but it’s precisely this rationalism that also makes the Pyrrhonist the least prudent of all philosophers, right?
If by prudence we mean sort of sound judgment, then surely no one thinks that sound judgment consists of withholding all belief until proof is forthcoming, even when that truth is not forthcoming. So loyalty to reason above all else, while sort of pristinely rationalistic is also catastrophically imprudent, and this is the reason why the common sense philosopher ultimately rejects Pyrrhonism. Pyrrhonism is an unlivable philosophy. And human beings are meant to live, not merely to contemplate. You can’t honestly — think about this. Just take the most basic belief, the belief in the existence of the external world. This is an unlivable philosophy. If you don’t believe that the external world exists, then you cannot sit in a chair. You cannot ring a doorbell. If you don’t believe in the existence of minds other than your own, you can’t talk to anyone. You can’t interact with others.

Now, of course, there’s no Pyrrhonist who is able to be so pure in their suspension disbelief that they literally existed in a state of complete inactivity, and so Pyrrhonist really is an unlivable philosophy. It is a purely academic position. And for the common sense philosopher, this is grotesque. Because human beings aren’t merely contemplators. They are living, active, social beings and are meant to engage life. So there’s really — the Scottish naturalist’s chief objection to Pyrrhonism is that there’s no point to it.

Now, if all you’re concerned about is with truth and falsity, then the question of whether something has a point is irrelevant. But if you’re concerned as much with living as with truth, if you value prudence as much as you value knowledge, then the fact that an activity like philosophy has no point is, of course, very important.
Now, there’s several places in which Hume and Reid talk about the kind of pointlessness of Pyrrhonism, the sense in which Pyrrhonism is an unlivable philosophy, and thus can have no positive effect on human life. Let me just read you — incidentally, some of Reid’s most colorful remarks come when he talks about this. He says some actually quite funny things in describing what someone would have to do to actually be a Pyrrhonist. He at one point talks about people walking into poles because they’re absolutely insisting upon not believing that the pole exists.

So let me just read a scatter of these quotations and then you can sort of on your own time dig around and find some more. There’s some real gems here. First let’s look at Hume, pages 158 to 159. Here Hume is talking about sort of the imprudence and ultimately the uncompelling nature of Pyrrhonism precisely because it can’t serve as a philosophy for living. He says at the bottom of 158, “The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of skepticism is action and employment in the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools where it is indeed difficult if not possible to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade and by the presence of the real objects which actuate our passions and sentiments are put into opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke and leave the most determined skeptic in the same condition as other mortals.”

So he’s saying, look, so long as you restrict yourself to a sort of purely academic discussion in the classroom or in the study, and you focus entirely on the question of justification and reasons, and so on and so forth, you might be able to sort of at least
talk the Pyrrhonist’s talk. But the minute you walk outside the study, the minute you
turn around to engage in some practical activity, even one as mundane as going to the
bathroom or going out for a smoke — the minute you do that all these Pyrrhonist
principles disappear. They evaporate. Because one’s very activity betrays one’s lack
of belief in the Pyrrhonist principle.

He then goes on to say at the bottom of page 159, “Here is the chief and most
confounding objection to excessive skepticism. No durable good can ever result from it
while it remains in its full force and vigor. We need only ask such a skeptic what his
meaning is and what he proposes by all these curious researches.” A little further
down on 160: “A Pyrrhonian cannot expect that his philosophy will have any constant
influence on the mind. Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On
the contrary, he must acknowledge if he will acknowledge anything that all human life
must perish whereas principles universally and steadily to prevail, all discourse, all
action would immediately cease and men would remain in a total lethargy.”

So no one can actually sustain the Pyrrhonist’s doubts and the Pyrrhonist
suspension of belief in real life and no one would want anyone to sustain such doubts in
real life because they would ultimately and very quickly lead to the other paralysis and
hence the destruction of human life. And so Pyrrhonism is simply an academic
philosophy that has no real interest. For the Scottish naturalist who values prudence
as much as truth, this is a damning indictment of Pyrrhonism.

Reid says pretty much the same thing, although his examples are quite a bit
funnier. He says on the bottom of page 169 — he’s talking about the belief in the
external world. He says, “I think it would not be prudent to throw off this belief, even if it were in my power.” Next page he says, “What is the consequence?” So now he’s imagining. “I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against the post that comes in my way. I step into a dirty kennel. And after 20 such wise and rational actions, I am taken up and clapped into a madhouse. Now I confess I would rather make one of the credulous fools who nature imposes upon than of those wise and rational philosophers who resolve to withhold the scent at all his expense.” So he says, look, you know, if I was actually to do what the Pyrrhonists suggest, I would walk into poles; I would step into holes; and within 20 minutes after being such a rational person, I’d be locked up as a lunatic. He says, “I’d rather be one of the vulgar commonfolk than such a wise, rational philosopher.”

So Reid here is not only saying that there’s no point to Pyrrhonism, but he’s showing utter contempt for the view. And it’s important to remember this. The contempt that Reid is showing for Pyrrhonism, sort of the charge of imprudence, is itself a rejection of rationalism. It’s a rejection of the idea that human beings are defined entirely by their reason or that human belief and action must always be justified in reason before we can proceed with the activities of daily life. So the first hallmark of Scottish naturalism is this idea that human beings are not just thinkers but doers.

The second hallmark of Scottish naturalism is the idea of natural belief and of the necessity of common sense. Now, let’s just sort of remind ourselves. By common sense, Reid and Hume mean this basic stock of basic beliefs, these unjustifiable and yet absolutely essential beliefs. So put aside the ordinary language use of the word
common sense. Today the word common sense, while related to this use — when we describe someone as having common sense, we usually mean that they’re kind of prudent, practical people. In that sense, there’s a continuity between Hume and Reid’s use of this word and the ordinary usage. But we also use the word common sense as a kind of honorific. A person of common sense is sort of praised as sort of a sound, salt-of-the-earth type as opposed to sort of the flighty, speculative type and the irrational types.

But when Hume and Reid speak of common sense — and Reid especially uses the expression — he means the belief in the existence of the external world, the belief that others exist other than oneself. The belief that, generally speaking, the future will be like the past. This is another belief, incidentally, that cannot be rationally justified. I cannot go through the reasons why, but it’s one of the ones that Hume focuses on. And, of course, the belief that the future will be like the past is essential to the scientific method. It’s essential to inductive reasoning. It’s on the basis of observed regularities that one may in science — that one makes inferences about what will happen later, what things in the future will be like.

So the whole method of scientific reasoning, which is essentially inductive in nature, rests upon the belief that the future will generally be like the past. And that belief itself has no rational grounds. This was one of Hume’s great triumphs, was demonstrating this. It’s called the problem of induction.

It’s this stock of very fundamental but unjustifiable beliefs that Reid and Hume refer to as comprising common sense. And the second hallmark of Scottish naturalism
is the idea of the necessity of common sense and the idea that the beliefs that comprise common sense are natural in the sense that they literally come from nature. They are part of our natural constitution. They are not acquired in the manner that other beliefs are. I want to say almost that Scottish naturalists think common sense to be innate in the sense that we’ve already discussed, the sense of innate knowledge that we’ve already discussed. I will say that neither Hume nor Reid refers to them as comprising innate knowledge. But when they talk about these beliefs being natural and arising naturally as a part of the human constitution, they’re certainly coming very close to an innatist thesis if not actually being innatists.

So this idea — this notion of natural belief and the necessity of common sense breaks down into the idea that the most fundamental beliefs, those beliefs which provide the backdrop for everything else that we know — the existence of the external world and of other minds, the notion that the future will generally be like the past — that these beliefs have no rational warrant but are instead natural in the sense that human beings are designed by nature to hold them.

And let’s distinguish two ways in which these beliefs are necessary. I’m talking about two senses of necessity, both of which these beliefs that comprise common sense satisfy. The first way in which Hume and Reid think that these common sense beliefs are natural or necessary is they both think that it is impossible for a human being not to hold them. So you noticed in some of the criticisms of the Pyrrhonist on both Hume and Reid’s part, one of the lines of criticism is that no real person could actually withhold a scent — withhold a belief in things like the external world. There is no actual
person that would actually not cease to believe in the existence of the external world, no matter how much they claim to require proof. Okay. I’ll say that again. Neither Hume nor Reid think that any real person, even the most devoted Pyrrhonist, can really disbelieve in the existence of the external world despite the professed need for proof.

And you sort of ask yourself this. Do you really think that anybody — forget about what they say in the lecture hall. Forget about what they say when you’re having a philosophical argument. Is there anyone you could imagine who wouldn’t duck if you swung a bat at their head because they have decided not to believe that the bat exists? Can you imagine such a person? Hume and Reid are saying nobody really, truly doesn’t believe in the existence of the external world. It’s a philosophical pose.

So in that sense, these commonsense beliefs are necessary in that we can’t help but believe them. For Hume and Reid, this is a sign that they are natural and not acquired. That is, that we don’t acquire these beliefs through the normal methods of belief acquisition, through sensory experience and through deductive reasoning, but rather these are beliefs that come to us naturally. This explains why we can’t help but believe them.

There is, however, a second even more interesting sense in which these beliefs are necessary. These beliefs are necessary in the sense that we can’t know or — we can’t know anything else or even reason without believing in these things first. In other words, if you don’t believe that the external world exists, then you can’t know anything else about the external world. So think about all the knowledge that comprises what we call science. None of that knowledge would be possible if we had no reason to
believe in the existence of the external world, if we had no reason to believe that the future generally speaking is like the past.

Notice unless we accepted some basic principles of reasoning, we wouldn’t be able to reason about anything. We couldn’t perform deductive proofs if we didn’t first believe that deductive proofs are valid ways of reaching the truth. And yet that belief is a commonsense belief. It’s not one that can be proven itself. So the two senses in which common sense beliefs are necessary is that, one, we can’t help but believe them even though there’s no proof for them and, two, that we can’t know anything else or even reason without them.

And both Hume and Reid say this in a very nice way. Reid, on pages 71 to 72 — Reid says at the bottom of 71, quote, “All reasoning must be from first principles. And for first principles, no other reason can be given but this: that, by the constitution of our nature, we are under a necessity of assenting to them. Such principles are parts of our constitution, no less than the power of thinking. Reason can neither make nor destroy them, nor can it do anything without them. It is like a telescope which may help a man to see farther who have eyes, but without eyes a telescope shows nothing at all. A mathematician cannot prove the truth of his axioms nor he can prove anything unless he takes them for granted. We cannot prove the existence of our minds nor even of our thoughts and sensations. A historian or a witness can prove nothing unless it is taken for granted that the memory and senses may be trusted. How or when I got such first principles upon which I build all my reasoning, I know not. For I had them before I can remember. But I am sure that they are parts of my constitution and that I cannot
throw them off. That our thoughts and sensations must have a subject which we call ourself is not therefore an opinion got by reasoning but a natural principle. That our senses of touch indicate something external, extended, figured, hard or soft, is not a deduction of reason but a natural principle. The belief of it and the very conception of it are equally part of our constitution.”

I think that this one sentence here really illustrates the second sense of necessity. Incidentally, the second sense of necessity is the idea that these commonsense beliefs are necessary in order for it to be possible to know anything else. This variety of necessity is known in the lingo as transcendental necessity. So a proposition is transcendentally necessary if it is necessary for the possibility of another proposition. Reid says this very beautifully in this one sentence. I’ll read the sentence again. “A mathematician cannot prove the truth of his axioms. That’s the sense in which the axioms cannot be justified. Nor can he prove anything unless he takes them for granted. The axioms of mathematics are necessary in that without them one can’t prove anything else in mathematics. This is the sense of necessity that pervades all of our commonsense beliefs.” They’re transcendentally necessary. They’re necessary in the sense that they are necessary for the possibility of knowing anything else or of reasoning at all.

Hume says a very similar thing on page 151, bottom of 151. “It seems evident that men are carried by a natural instinct to prepossession to repose faith in their senses and that without any reasoning or even almost before the use of reason we always suppose an external universe which depends not on our perception but would
exist though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated."

So notice how he says here that we believe in the existence of the external world without reasoning, and indeed that belief is prior to our ability to reason. In order to reason, we first have to believe things like this. We have to believe these kinds of axiomatic, basic, commonsense notions before we can believe anything else, before we can reason to anything else.

There’s an irony here and the irony is as follows. The rationalist — now, think about the whole Enlightenment arc that we’ve sort of been getting glimpses of throughout this part of the course. The whole idea of the Enlightenment was to vindicate reason over authority, right? The idea that the individual mind should seek out and take possession of knowledge on its own without external authority interfering, without being dictated to by external authorities, and in the Middle Ages those external authorities would’ve been the church and the royalty, the nobility.

So there was a great sort of sense of political liberation wrapped up in this rationalistic idea. The center of this was the idea of knowledge acquisition. Isn’t it ironic that those who were most fervently committed to the process of the rationalistic notion of individual knowledge acquisition ultimately hold a position that makes the acquisition of knowledge impossible while those like Hume and Reid, who are willing to let go of an awful lot, are willing to say there’s an awful lot that can’t be proven. There’s an awful lot that we simply have to believe for no good reason at all. But it’s that position which ultimately makes the acquisition of knowledge for the individual possible. I think there’s an irony in that and there’s a lesson in that about perhaps
pushing too hard.

Let’s talk for a minute or two about what we’re gonna do next time — the next two times. Our entire discussion in this part of the course thus far — our entire discussion of knowledge thus far has assumed that knowledge is a species of belief. Remember, knowledge in its traditional view is true justified belief. To know something, then, on the traditional view is to be in a mental state which presents a true picture of or otherwise corresponds to some portion of an independently existent world. So the traditional view — knowledge is a kind of belief. Knowledge is a belief that somehow attached to the truth.

But Ryle wants to point something out which I think is very important to point out. We use the verb to know in many ways. In other words, we don’t only use the verb to know to describe a mental state. In particular, some of the ways in which we use this verb problematize the traditional conception of knowledge. Here’s another way that we use the word to know. I’m gonna give two examples. Here’s one: My daughter knows how to swim. Here’s another: I know how to play chess. Notice here that when we use the word to know in these ways, we’re not so much attributing to a person a certain mental state; rather, we’re describing a certain capacity or ability or competence on their part.

Ryle thinks that recognizing this second use of the verb to know is very important and that it has profound implications for the traditional conception of knowing, that first conception of knowing in which knowing is true justified belief. Specifically, on the traditional view, this second type of — let’s call it performative knowing — on the
traditional view, the performative type of knowing is taken to be derivative of the — let’s call it epistemic or propositional type of knowing. In other words, it’s the fact that I have knowledge in the first sense, that I have a set of true beliefs, that I’m able to then go and engage in competent performance. Those true beliefs play the role almost like rules or instructions that then instruct me in the correct performance. That’s the traditional view of the relationship between the two kinds of knowing. The first kind makes possible the second kind. But Ryle wants to say that if we reflect upon the second type of knowing, we’re going to find that this traditional model of the relationship between the two is problematic to say the least.

All I want you to think about while you’re reading Ryle — I want you to do the following. I want you to try and list as many different uses of the verb to know as you can. So think about all the different ways in which you use the word I know, he knows, she knows. I want you to think of all the different types of sentences that you use that word in and see if you can identify which ones conform to the first of meaning of the word and which of them conform to the second meaning of the word. This is gonna be crucial to understanding Ryle’s critique.

With that I will leave you and we will pick this up again next time.